

United States Mission to the OSCE

Any Other Business

As prepared for delivery by Michael Posner
U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights, and
at the OSCE Human Dimension Implementation Meeting
October 9, 2009

Thank you, Mr. Moderator.

This is the seventh consecutive year in which the United States has made a statement under “any other business” about the situation in Turkmenistan. My country has carefully monitored the policies of President Berdimuhamedov and his government and has engaged with Ashgabat to encourage broad-based reforms.

We welcome the fact that over the past year the government of Turkmenistan has, in fact, taken several positive steps. The December 14, 2008, parliamentary elections showed some limited progress. We also welcome the release of Muhammetguly Aymuradov, the longest-serving political prisoner in Turkmenistan, after serving more than 14 years in jail.

Some reform of the education system also has taken place, including the addition of one more year for basic education and, in higher education, expanding student enrollments, extending the term of study to five years, and beginning to re-establish post-graduate programs. We are deeply concerned, however, about the continued denial of the freedom of movement for hundreds of Turkmen students and the rules requiring them to obtain permission from several state agencies in order to study abroad. Many students, including those who are recipients of U.S. government scholarships, are blocked from leaving the country to complete their studies abroad.

Other serious shortcomings remain in a number of critical areas. For example, restrictions continue to be imposed on the right of citizens to leave the country. All mass media remain state-controlled. The few independent journalists who prepare reports for international organizations continue to face harassment as a result of their work. After years of negotiations, the government still has not agreed to allow the International Committee of the Red Cross access to its prisons. Religious organizations face serious difficulties in registering, as do NGOs.

We urge the government of Turkmenistan to continue positive momentum on reform. Citizens should have unfettered ability to travel inside and outside of the country. Restrictions on public access to information should be removed from television, the Internet, and print sources. Independent journalists should be allowed to work without fear of harassment or retribution.

Revision of the Law on Religion should be completed, following consultations with representatives of all religious groups, and the final text of the law should incorporate recommendations by international experts to ensure conformity with Turkmenistan’s

international human rights obligations and to clarify and simplify registration requirements. We welcome the good government cooperation extended on the occasion of the visit by the UN Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion and Belief in September 2008, and we welcome the improvement in relations reported by most religious groups. We also welcome a prosecutor's significant fining of a policeman for beating a Jehovah's Witness. We are concerned about the imprisonment for conscientious objection to military service of four members of Jehovah's Witnesses, and we urge the government to develop alternatives to military service for conscientious objectors.

We welcome the government's plans to revise the Law on Public Associations, and urge that changes include a liberalization of the requirements for NGOs to register. We also urge continued reform of Turkmenistan's electoral system in line with its OSCE commitments, including providing a procedure for the establishment of alternative political parties. We welcome changes made in 2008 that allowed independent candidates to run for office, but urge that they be allowed to do so in practice, including by freely meeting with voters or contesting election procedures. We also urge Turkmen authorities to address corruption in the education system. There are increasingly frequent reports that students must pay large bribes in order to enter universities, earn good grades, and graduate.

One very concrete step that could be taken immediately and would be a clear signal of the government's intention to move forward with reform would be to allow the International Committee of the Red Cross/Red Crescent and other independent observers access to prisons, including to those imprisoned in connection with the events of November 2002. For the past seven years, we have asked for information on and access to our former OSCE colleague, Batyr Berdiev. We have heard reports that he may have died in prison and contradictory reports that he may still be alive. His family has the right to know about his welfare and whereabouts. In fact, under Turkmenistan's own legislation and according to former Minister Berdiev's sentence, his family should have had been able to visit him, beginning in January 2008. We therefore see no reason why the current government cannot provide immediately either access to former Minister Berdiev or, if he is no longer alive, information concerning his fate.

Mr. Moderator, sustained OSCE engagement is needed to increase dialogue with Turkmenistan. We urge delegations of participating States to meet with Turkmen NGO representatives whenever possible. We also urge ODIHR to step up efforts to engage the new government on human dimension issues.

Thank you, Mr. Moderator.